



State of Connecticut COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 2, Hartford, CT 06103

Promoting Equality and Justice for all People

Planning and Development Committee – March 14, 2022 **CHRO Testimony Regarding** **HB 5361 – AAC Public Access to Certain Coastal Resources** **HB 5429 – AAC Transit-Oriented Development**

Representative McCarthy Vahey, Senator Cassano, Representative Zullo, Senator Hwang, and members of the Planning and Development Committee, the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities appreciates the opportunity to submit this testimony on the following bills on today's agenda.

HB 5361 – An Act Concerning Public Access to Certain Coastal Resources

As the state agency charged with enforcing Connecticut's antidiscrimination statutes and with advocating for equal opportunity for all of Connecticut's residents, the CHRO supports HB 5361, An Act Concerning Public Access to Certain Coastal Resources. In particular, the bill will prohibit municipalities from keeping nonresidents from enjoying municipal beaches unless such restrictions also apply to town residents and from charging excessive entrance, use, or parking fees greater than fifty per cent of the fees charged to residents.

Restrictions and excessive fees charged to non-residents have an exclusionary and often discriminatory effect. These beaches are public assets subsidized by millions of dollars' worth of environmental and park development grants funded by taxpayers. Some communities, however, put in place policies and fees that restrict access to public beaches to local residents. Westport, for example, made headlines for charging local residents \$50 for seasonal parking passes but charged \$775 for the same pass for most non-residents.

These policies are a perfect example of how Connecticut's many facially non-discriminatory policies can work to have a discriminatory effect. The latest census data shows that Westport has a population that is 89.6% White and 1.1% Black. Norwalk, the next town over from Westport, has a population that is 72.4% White and 14.7% Black. While Westport's beach fees say nothing about race or any other protected class on the policy's face, their effect is to make it so that only residents of the mostly White town can visit the beach while residents of the much more diverse town next door cannot. It is possible no one intended these fees to have a discriminatory and exclusionary effect, but that is what the policy does. The CHRO is in support of curbing these policies and therefore strongly supports HB 5361.

HB 5429 – An Act Concerning Transit-Oriented Development

The Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities supports HB 5429 and its aim to improve access to equitable transit-oriented communities, and thereby increase access to affordable housing. The Commission is well aware of the grave impact individual town-based zoning statutes and regulations have had on the segregation of the residents of Connecticut. The Commission issued its Connecticut Zoning and Discrimination

Report in 2021.¹ The report focused on the discriminatory effects of zoning laws in Connecticut. Where one lives affects access to education, health care, services, food, jobs, and more.

The Commission knows this is just the beginning. Comprehensive reform needs to take place not only in suburban areas, but in cities. Proximity to Whiteness should not be considered a solution to the housing issues facing our state. Residents should be given a choice as to where they want to live and not be required to move to suburban areas for safe, affordable housing. Transit-oriented communities provide an array of housing options, including affordable homes, in areas where there are already existing resources near train or bus stations.

As the enforcement agency for the fair housing laws in Connecticut, the Commission holds a valuable perspective in working towards addressing the housing crisis facing our state. The impact zoning reform would have on our state and the people who live in it is beyond measure. The Commission urges the committee to pass HB 5429 as an important step towards making this a more equitable state for all Connecticut residents.

¹ [CHROs-Zoning-and-Discrimination-2021-Report.pdf \(ct.gov\)](#)